

Virginia: 1st Glimpse of U.S. for Soviet Pilot Who Defected

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Heavy rainfall drenched Dulles International Airport as the CIA-leased executive jet rolled to a stop in the 4 a.m. darkness.

Moments later, several men stepped off the plane and jumped into nearby cars. One of them, Viktor I. Belenko, was a defector from the Soviet Union.

Belenko was the one with the boyish face, big blue eyes and blond hair. He stood a shade over 5-foot-8, and had strong shoulders developed by years of sports and exercise.

The men, CIA agents, and Belenko traveled for about an hour along back roads, then turned into a long driveway. Their cars' headlights glared on a brick, double-door mansion.

Belenko spent his first night in the United States in that house somewhere in Northern Virginia. "It was just a property the CIA had at the time," said John Barron, a senior editor in the Washington bureau of Reader's Digest.

Barron, considered an expert on Soviet intelligence and military affairs, has recently published a book, "Mig Pilot," about Belenko, and gave United Press International permission to quote from it.

Belenko saw his first supermarket in Virginia, learned to drive here, lived near Falls Church and tangled with a personal crisis at a truckstop a few miles north of Richmond—all as a guest of the CIA.

The CIA, headquartered in Fairfax County's Langley neighborhood, apparently uses Virginia to help introduce Soviet defectors to Americans and their lifestyles. "There are other very significant people from the Soviet Union, high-level types, who've been beguiled by Virginia," Barron said. "For most of them, it's the first state they see."

Dale Petersen, a CIA press officer, declined to elaborate. "Obviously we don't say much about defectors," he said. "We have a responsibility to settle them without much publicity. We can't really say whether we use Virginia or any other state."

Belenko was considered one of the most important Soviet defectors ever

to reach the United States. He was a lieutenant in the Soviet air force when he landed a MIG25 at a northern Japanese airport Sept. 6, 1976, and announced he wanted asylum in the United States.

The MIG25 was believed at the time to be the most advanced combat aircraft in the world. Sixty-seven days after Belenko landed, U.S. and Japanese officials had completed their examination of the plane's secrets, and re-

turned it—in pieces—to the Soviets. Belenko stayed.

Belenko no longer lives in Virginia. "But he's toured it up and down and forward and backward and just loves it," Barron said.

Viktor Belenko's love affair with Virginia began the day after he spent his first night in the U.S. in that southern mansion "safe house" owned by the CIA.

He first was escorted on a tour of Northern Virginia's wooded, rolling horse country with the Blue Ridge Mountains in the distance. Belenko was impressed.

"It was the man-made order of the farmlands they passed that most struck Belenko"—the symmetry of the fields, the well-mended fences, painted barns, fat cattle, lush meadows.

He asked where the outhouses were. The CIA men laughed and said few American houses had such things anymore.

Belenko's first encounter with an American shopping center, and the lifestyle it represented, came on "the outskirts of a small Virginia town," Barron told UPI. "Viktor doesn't recall exactly where." But Barron said he believes it may have been Fredericksburg, Culpeper or Warrenton.

Two CIA men and Belenko started for a clothing store, but Belenko wanted to tour a supermarket. He "explored and stared in ever-widening wonder" at all the meats, vegetables, beer, cans and packages, cookies, the cleanliness.

He never had seen such a market, one with so many products available, or one without long lines of people. He'd always been told "Americans live in the shadow of hunger and that pockets of near starvation were widespread."

Belenko, uncertain what to believe, decided the store—the entire shopping center—was a CIA front, built and operated especially to fool defectors.

He "bolted into a shop offering televisions, stereos, radios and calculators." Belenko still disbelieved. He questioned the CIA men: can an "average American worker" buy a color television set? In Russia, such a set would cost five months' wages.

Next door, Belenko bought his first suit—gray flannel—and a button-down shirt. He also saw his first gasoline station "in which there were no lines."

"In Belenko's past life, gasoline outlets were so scarce that a wait of four or five hours for fuel was ordinary."

In coming weeks, Belenko lived in an apartment near Falls Church. It had a small den, two bathrooms, wall-to-wall carpeting, dishwasher and disposal. CIA men assured him such apartments were within the means of moderate-income Americans.

He and his CIA bodyguards toured the King Dominion amusement park about 25 miles north of Richmond.

Later, Belenko, considered of "working-class" origins in Russia, wanted to see "a real workers' bar." He found one near Falls Church, complete with a long bar, stools, wooden booths and men in working clothes drinking beer or watching Monday night football on a giant television.

The menu was chalked on a blackboard. Belenko ordered a barbecue sandwich, French fries, coleslaw and beer. "The little green check totaled \$2.08."

Belenko had to learn to drive, and he mastered the basics in about an hour. He had to get a Virginia learner's permit. He was an excellent

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driver, but with one bad habit: he speeded.

Soon after he won his license, a Virginia state trooper stopped him on Interstate 95. He asked Belenko if he knew he was driving 85 miles per hour. Belenko smiled, handed over his driver's license—and two \$20 bills. Belenko thought at the time he was doing what was expected of him.

The CIA man with Belenko quickly jumped out of the car and explained the situation to the trooper. He told Belenko he wanted to shake his hand. The CIA man told Belenko that attempted bribery was a serious crime in the United States.

Weeks, then months passed. Belenko assumed his new lifestyle, moved to a midwestern farm, and traveled to other places. He was searching, trying to understand something.

He was free, independent, something he'd wanted all his life. But he missed his homeland. And the Soviets were exerting tremendous pressure to get him back.

Belenko decided. The tug was too great. He would go back to Russia.

Somewhere between the North Carolina line and Richmond, Belenko began to shake, sweat, turn pale.

He pulled into a truck stop a few miles north of Richmond at about 2 a.m.

"A very lovely lady, a waitress, at the truck stop just took a motherly interest in him," Barron told UPI. She insisted Belenko eat something.

At 4 a.m., Belenko knocked on the door of a Washington mansion. It was not the Soviet Embassy, but the home of a high-level CIA official.

Viktor I. Belenko had made his peace with himself—and his new country.